

DURKHEIM, MEAD AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORY

A Thesis

by

CARLOS G. BARRETO-BECK

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

May 2012

Major Subject: Sociology

Durkheim, Mead and Contemporary Social Theory

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ABSTRACT

Durkheim, Mead and Contemporary Social Theory. (May 2012)

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The thesis presented here explores the relevance of the classical works of Emile Durkheim and George Herbert Mead to contemporary postmodern cultural critiques. Postmodern social theory specifically that of Richard Rorty and Jean Baudrillard have come to offer a type of social theory that challenges the notion of the social. This referential problem of the social becomes a striking attack on the epistemology of sociology, which purports to offer scientific knowledge about the human condition as a social process.

The theoretical works of Durkheim and Mead especially their respective concepts of the “collective consciousness” and the “generalized other” are offered here as closely related articulations of the core sociological concept of “the social.” It is argued that postmodernism, by postulating an excessively precarious social theory, falls short as a theory of society when juxtaposed to the classic sociologies of Durkheim and Mead.

However, it is also noted that the transformation of the field of sociology from a primarily textual discourse to a quantitative enterprise increasingly exposes the field of sociology to uniquely postmodern critiques.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
Postmodernism and Sociology	1
The Postmodern Problematic	3
The Social as Lost Referential	5
Durkheim, Mead, Baudrillard and Rorty—Why? How?	9
II COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE GENERALIZED	
OTHER.....	11
The Starting Point.....	11
Collective Consciousness and The Generalized Other	13
The Decline of Social Context	19
Social Context.....	20
The De-contextualization of Society	24
The Political Image and Anomie.....	30
III LANGUAGE PLAY AND LANGUAGE GAMES	36
Of Rorty and Mead.....	36
Mead.....	39
Rorty	42
IV POSTMODERNISM, FINITUDE AND THE SOCIAL	50
<i>Fin-de-Siècle</i> vs. <i>Fin-de-Millennium</i>	51
Finitude.....	52
Durkheim and Alienation	55
Regenerative Medicine and the Transcending Self.....	58
Social Implosion of Time and the Internet.....	61
Transgressing Finitude and Global Warming	64
Fin	65

V	CONCLUSIONS: FINAL THOUGHTS	67
	Reflections on Sociology	67
	The Death of the Social?	69
	REFERENCES	72
	VITA	75

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism and Sociology

The following thesis seeks to illustrate Mills' sociological imagination broadly applied to concepts that, while integral to the foundation of early sociology, now lie underneath the formidable disciplinary constructions, or what Rorty refers to as the systematic practices, of contemporary American Sociology (Mills, 1959; Ritzer, 1997: 25). The premise underlying this thesis is that once the social nature of man was established and accepted within the growing field of sociology, the next generation of sociologists did not further the earlier inquiry into the metaphysical foundations of these most important pillars of the discipline. Thus I build around this premise and propose an intellectual probing into the philosophical foundations of the concepts that laid the groundwork for the development of sociology, more generally "the social," and specifically "man as social being."

In the following I revisit a most important question in early twentieth century sociology, that is: What is the social according to classical and contemporary theorists? Has it, as some theorists posit, changed since the foundations of sociology were laid at the turn of the 20th century? And alternatively: in what ways has it remained constant? In elaborating my argument, I trust Mills' sociological sensibility to guide my inquiry into the classical works of Durkheim and Mead, while also relying on the more recent

This thesis follows the style of *Theory, Culture & Society*.

works of Baudrillard and Rorty.

Despite their iconic status in sociology and their relevance to the schools of Structural Functionalism and Symbolic Interactionism, Mestrovic notes, that the theoretical work of Durkheim and Mead continues to be underrepresented in the discipline (1988, 1991a). Both scholars remain open to misinterpretation and misrepresentation within the English-speaking world. Durkheim, writing in French, becomes lost in translation as well as largely unread in his native tongue. While Mead, as noted in Morris's introduction to *Mind, Self and Society*, publishing little, has left behind merely a skeletal framework of his thought pieced together from the notes of his students (1972: v-vii). It may be argued that contemporary sociology by placing these scholars into what have become the theoretical paradigms linked to their work, e.g. Structural Functionalism or Symbolic Interactionism respectively; or by simply noting their historical importance, easily dismissible as "classical," has accomplished much towards eclipsing their original insights.

Thus, there exists in contemporary sociology a plethora of barriers to understanding and incorporating their unique contributions into the current fragmented contemporary discourses on social theory and culture (Ritzer, 1997: 12-3). By contextualizing their respective constructs of "collective consciousness" and "generalized other" within a "fin de siècle" narrative, I hope to illuminate the importance of their contribution to today's theoretical narrative on "the social" when critically

revisiting these scholars' work. Furthermore, by employing a dialectical style in which their work is presented through a simulated dialogue between these "classical" theorists and their contemporary counterparts, in part influenced by each thinker's respective predecessor, Durkheim vis-à-vis Baudrillard and Mead vis-à-vis Rorty, I hope to impress these theories with a contemporary relevance of their own. Perhaps not just the arrival of another *fin de siècle*, but also a monumental *fin de millennium* will provide the impetus necessary for a young generation of sociologists to search for new insights into their work and provide a fresh 21st century vision of Durkheim and Mead's intellectual contribution to the field. This thesis represents but a very humble effort toward this much larger goal.

Before turning to the main body of the thesis, however, it seems appropriate to provide a brief discussion of the postmodern critique of sociology, which has effectively created a need to reexamine some of sociology's core concepts. In particular a brief synopsis of the postmodern response to sociology's penchant to pursue a scientific legitimation of the field appears warranted here; since many of the ideas sketched below are revisited and developed more fully when discussing the work of these authors in the chapters that follow.

The Postmodern Problematic

American Sociology, as Ritzer notes, has remained relatively oblivious to postmodernism; however the discipline's attempt to gain legitimacy as a scientific field of study while also preserving its deep roots in the humanities has exposed it to the

relentless critiques of postmodernism. This critique in large part has been fueled by sociology's own disciplinary structure, which is overwhelmingly dominated by texts and by various intellectual articulations of those texts, as illustrated by the narrative developed here. Given the dominance of text and its analysis in postmodernism, it is not surprising then to find such a pointed and enveloping critique of sociology in the works of Baudrillard and Rorty. Not coincidentally, Baudrillard's theoretical trajectory led him to gradually proclaim the "death of the social" (in Gane, 1993: 106); and for Rorty eventually to propose: "deconstruct[ing] the image of the Mirror of Nature" (in Ritzer, 1997: 24). These two ideas make it timely for a new generation of sociologists to seize upon them and take advantage of this fertile theoretical environment to return to the foundational works of sociology and to re-examine these groundbreaking concepts from afresh. For these two postmodernists not only pursued eclipsing the notion that sociology, as the study of the social, is founded in reality; in other words suspected the premise that the concept of the social is a reflection or a reference to the way the world actually is, or to reality itself.

These critiques are not only addressed by Baudrillard and Rorty, but by other prominent theorists associated with postmodernity, such as Bauman and Lyotard and have come to be seen by many as an attack on science. For example, Bauman, critiques the inclination of scientists for knowledge legislation; while Lyotard, sees science as "want[ing] everyone to believe that it offers legitimate, *true* knowledge and it critiques narratives for being illegitimate or *untrue*" (in Ritzer, 1997: 130). In these authors' views, sociologists have yet to defend, refute or propose an alternative view in response

to these antifoundationalist claims. As such, these postmodernist critiques will be further discussed throughout the remaining sections of the introduction because they set the stage upon which the ideas presented here are articulated.

The Social as Lost Referential

As already noted it is almost taken for granted that the works of Durkheim and Mead have been woven carefully and appropriately into the theoretical fabric of contemporary sociology. Underlying this perspective is the scientific assumption that those constructs that were and continue to be beneficial to the field or were an accurate representation (reference) of reality have been totally absorbed into mainstream sociology, as one finds, for example in an introductory or undergraduate theory text. And, concomitantly, that whatever material from their work was incorporated in this manner is exhaustive of the totality of their intellectual contributions. It almost appears as if there was nothing excluded or left behind in the process of incorporation. In other words those theoretical works that were found to be true to the epistemological construction of the times were brought along and updated as sociology moved forward as a distinct field of study; and other ideas and works that were wanting or did not quite “fit” the existing dominant paradigm were ignored, as if left behind to gradually stagnate.

Ritzer outlines the postmodernist understanding of this phenomenon when discussing the myth of progress. Specifically, Ritzer notes that the myth of progress becomes one of the central positions of critique for postmodernists against the

Enlightenment narrative, of which science, and thus sociology, is bound (1997: 124-28). The myth of progress parallels the Hegelian dialectic's notion of the convergence of knowledge and truth—that is, the notion that over time our abstractions of reality increasingly reflect that reality, a concept which can at the very least be traced back to Descartes (McDermott in Stuhr, 2000: 145). Science and sociology, insofar as it is a science, are then seen as highly engaged in the construction and legitimization of truth (science is a cosmology). Thus these critiques of contemporary knowledge construction open up the foundations of sociology to inspection and reinterpretation (Kojève, 1969).

William James, Durkheim and others have noted that changes in knowledge often occur through intellectual warfare and the misappropriation and misinterpretation that often accompany them (James, 1997; Durkheim, 1974; Mestrovic, 1991). Alternatively, as Mead argues in “The Present as the Locus of Reality,” past knowledge is always interpreted from the perspective of the present (2000). For Mead then, we see that present knowledge restricts the meaning of past knowledge as opposed to simply adding to it (Mead, 1972:1-31). Hence knowledge rather than being diachronic or linear, functions in a synchronic or nonlinear manner (knowledge is a negative rather than positive endeavor).

The assumption of progress in sociological work, grounded on the scientific schema (myth of progress), is anchored on the supposition of the ideal of interpretative exactitude. However, interpretations, being always a partially subjective endeavor situated within the existential drama of the individual and the particular historical

moment, are always susceptible to re-interpretation, in fact as Mead theorizes reconstruction is the rule rather than the exception. As such, Durkheim's sociology when peered through the lens of Parsons, an economically trained American sociologist, becomes a self-correcting functional social theory. Interpretation is always a give and take between the interpreter and context in which this interpretation takes place, what amounts to the play between biography and history (Mills, 1959). An example of the discrepancies that inevitably arise in the process of interpretation is the work done over the Durkheimian concept of anomie, which Mestrovic argues has been fundamentally misrepresented in American sociological discourse as simply any situation that lacks norms (1988: 54-76).

G.H. Mead has perhaps suffered less from misunderstanding in the English-speaking world than Durkheim, mainly because of the latter's need for translation. Unfortunately, however, G.H. Mead's theoretical legacy will always suffer from not having a completed body of work; or at the very least a substantial amount of written material authored by him. Instead, all we will ever have is a skeleton or ghost of his work (Campbell in Stuhr, 2000: 541). Furthermore, the positivist perspective to which many American social scientists subscribe has obscured Mead's original contributions to the extent that ideas, which seem unlikely to yield empirical results under experimental conditions, were left, and remain by the wayside. However, I return to Mead in this work, in the same manner previous scholars have revisited the intellectual giants that founded their respective fields, in order to brighten the discourse surrounding the

foundational conceptions associated with his thought, which have taken an uncritical position within the contemporary framework.

By contextualizing Mead's theories within a "fin de siècle" sensibility that imbued many of his contemporaries, I will be partially re-interpreting his work. To be sure Mead does not offer the casual reader a doom and gloom portrait of the individual or of society as found in Freud (Freud, 1984). And unlike Durkheim, he does not present a 'moderate' commitment to the idea that society in a transitory state rife with anomie, will re-integrate around new collective representations. Instead Mead, steeped in the pragmatic sensibility of his place and time, suggests a theory of minds, selves and societies as erupting from constructive and reconstructive processes of human co-existence, for which communication is but one central aspect.

Nonetheless, Mead, like his continental contemporaries was influenced by the same "fin de siècle" sentiment that enveloped the period, though contextualized within America's progressive nature and growing global status. Mead was witness to a specific social environment characterized by isolationism, nationalism, racism and xenophobia, and these undoubtedly influenced his theorizing, particularly of the merging of "I" and "Me" and the detriment this plays for minds, selves and societies (Campbell in Stuhr, 2000: 548). Thus Mead's work is of contemporary importance and revisiting his thought will do much to illuminate ways in which theorists may confront current social issues that to some extent parallel his time. As such, they are salient to the forthcoming discussion, if perhaps sometimes in the background, since the provocativeness of these

notions initially attracted the author to reflect upon their arguments and to seek for either refutation, agreement or both within the foundations of sociology

Durkheim, Mead, Baudrillard and Rorty—Why? How?

Three questions are posited here for investigation: *why should the theoretical work of Durkheim be paralleled with that of Mead?* And further, *why is their work placed here in a simulated dialogue with the contemporary works of theorists such as Baudrillard and Rorty?* Finally and closely following the two above, how *can these divergent works be connected?* That is, under what conditions or claims am I justified in making these parallels? In brief, it is the hope of the author that a fresh reading of their works will illuminate the points necessary to establish legitimate connections between their respective conceptualizations of the social. It is important to draw out these associations because as mentioned above much of their thought has been obscured and refuted by contemporary social thinkers. The author recognizes that the texts of these theorists are open to interpretation and that no single interpretation should be privileged, however, a “faithful re-reading” is attempted on the basis of contextualizing these theorists in the ‘fin de siècle’ spirit and pragmatic attitude that characterized their particular times.

Having set the theoretical atmosphere, particularly the postmodernist critique introduced here which substantiates the author’s premise that sociology’s predilection for establishing the scientific foundation of the discipline helped obscure the work of these classical sociologists, the author will now turn to a more in-depth discussion of the

ideas briefly outlined in this introduction. Chapter two attempts to flesh out the parallels one finds in the works of Durkheim and Mead, from an acknowledged Durkheimian perspective, in order to reach the epistemological heart of sociology, “the social.”

Chapter three’s objective is the exploration of Rorty’s conception of society (arguably postmodern) to which it juxtaposes Mead’s own conception of society in the hope of clarifying these social theories. Finally, chapter four advances the question of the changing nature of the social by articulating competing notions of alienation, Baudrillard’s and Durkheim’s; while also acknowledging the relevance of Mead’s insight into the process of time to the communication technologies that revolve around contemporary manifestations of alienation.

CHAPTER II

COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE GENERALIZED OTHER

The Starting Point

There lies in philosophy a classic divide between varying conceptions of reality. This division extends into discussions of metaphysics, epistemology, morality and many other specialized fields of philosophical inquiry. This divide is between rationalism and empiricism, and it includes such giants of the field as Kant and Hume. Where rationalism seeks to submit reality or our knowledge of reality to preexisting categories of the mind, empiricism attempts to submit the mind to sensory experiences of reality. In Durkheim's words:

For some (the rationalists), the categories of understanding cannot be derived from experience: they are logically prior to it and condition it. They are conceived as simple givens, irreducible and immanent in the human mind by virtue of its inherent make-up... For others (the empiricists), by contrast, these categories are constructed, made of bits and pieces, and it is the individual who forges this construction (2001: 15).

James provides a similar account of these epistemologies when he notes:

Empiricism is known as the opposite of rationalism. Rationalism tends to emphasize universals and to make wholes prior to parts in the order of logic as well as in that of being. Empiricism, on the contrary, lays the explanatory stress on the part, the element, the individual, and treats the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction (James in Stuhr, 2000: 181-2).

These descriptions are however practical oversimplifications of the many differences that exist between these two divergent and often confrontational schools of thought.

Emile Durkheim and William James represent important manifestations in the reconciling of this epistemological split. In *Pragmatism and Sociology*, Durkheim elaborates his critical reception of pragmatism, which he argues was the only contemporary theory of truth available at the turn of the 20th century. Therefore, for Durkheim, pragmatism represented the best position to assist in the reformation of rationalism, which was of the utmost importance in the preservation of French culture in Durkheim's view (1983: 1). Both James and Durkheim believed themselves to be reformists within their ascribed epistemological foundations: James, a radical empiricist, and Durkheim, a renovated rationalist. By including within the range of experience, phenomena that easily escape sensory perception, James did much in radicalizing empiricism (McDermott in Stuhr, 2000: 149-50). Durkheim accomplished a similar task when formulating the argument that mental categories such as reason and truth are human constructions and as such fortuitous (Mestrovic, 1988: 43-76). I propose that somewhere in between the gulf of James and Durkheim's thought lies the social psychology of G.H. Mead. Mead's extraordinary intellectual and emotional sensibility, very much like that of Durkheim and exemplifying the meaning of Mill's sociological imagination, allows him to perceive, albeit in a psychologically nuanced manner, the tension between society and individuals. Thus, Mead's own intellectual trajectory, though originating from a divergent epistemological position—that of American pragmatism, led him to coincide on many points with Durkheim's thought.

Collective Consciousness and The Generalized Other

Durkheim and Mead were for all practical purposes contemporaries. To this extent, their scholarship was very much influenced by the academic and scientific thinking of the late nineteenth century. Both men relied on the intellectual currents of their time in establishing the foundations of their respective discussions on social integration. The “collective consciousness” for Durkheim and the “generalized other” in Mead effectively describe comparable social phenomenon, which these authors respectively employ in elaborating the extent of social integration in society. Specifically, it is my argument that the concepts of “collective consciousness” and the “generalized other” are fundamentally alike and that this likeness is at the root of the parallelism that one finds in their conceptions of social integration as postulated by “organic solidarity” and “universal society” (Durkheim, 1984: 68; Mead, 1972: 281).

An important connection between these two authors and one that definitely draws on their late 19th century intellectual context is found in their frequent references to Darwin’s theory of evolution (Durkheim, 1984: 144, 208-9); Mead, 1972: 15-9, 72-94, 358). The deep influence of Darwin can be seen within their respective writings, for Durkheim, “as the environment in which societies live becomes increasingly complex, and consequently more fluctuating, they must change frequently in order to survive” (1984: 14). Mead makes a comparable statement when writing:

The relation of the social process of behavior—or the relation of the social organism—to the social environment is analogous to the relation of the processes of individual biological activity—or the relation of the individual organism—to the physical-biological environment (1972: 130).

Both authors refer to a level of social evolution, in which individuals and social groups are dynamic within a social environment, much like Darwin's thesis that animals are dynamic over time and space.

Not surprising, Durkheim and Mead followed an assumption of social realism in studying society. For example, Durkheim criticizes Spencer for not taking society as *sui generis*:

Spencer does not see in societies a true reality, existing by itself by virtue of specific and necessary causes, one that consequently bears down upon man, imposing upon him its own nature and to which he is forced to adapt in order to continue living, just as he does to his physical environment (1984: 281).

Likewise, Mead writes: "For social psychology, the whole (society) is prior to the part (the individual), not the part to the whole; and the part is explained in terms of the whole, not the whole in terms of the part or parts" (1972: 7). He further notes:

For if, as Wundt does, you presuppose the existence of mind at the start, as explaining or making possible the social process of experience, then the origin of minds and the interaction among minds become mysteries. But if, on the other hand, you regard the social process of experience as prior (in a rudimentary form) to the existence of mind and explain the origin of minds in terms of the interaction among individuals with that process, then not only the origin of mind, but also the interaction among minds (which is thus seen to be internal to their very nature and presupposed by their existence or development at all) cease to seem mysterious or miraculous (1972: 50).

Society for both Durkheim and Mead is a whole greater than and which bears down upon its parts. In holding society as *sui generis* they are making an assumption, which Mead states, and which I believe Durkheim would agree with; "we attempt to explain the conduct of the individual in terms of the organized conduct of the social group, rather than to account for the organized conduct of the social group in terms of the conduct of

the separate individuals” (1972: 7).

Although Durkheim and Mead’s conceptions of the “collective consciousness” and the “generalized other” diverge in their elaboration, fundamentally they seek to outline similar social phenomena or facts within the social environment. For instance, Durkheim describes the “collective consciousness” as emerging from “the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society [forming] a determinate system with a life of its own” (1984: 39). The implied meaning in Durkheim’s above statement is strikingly similar to Mead’s elaboration of the “generalized other.” Mead notes:

We get then an “other” which is an organization of the attitudes of those involved in the same process. The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called the “generalized other. The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community (1972: 154).

Both of these explanations present similar descriptions that imply that the common characteristics of the social group become established, real and distinct, although not separate from, the individuals in the group. For Durkheim it is stated as a “determinate system with a life of its own;” and for Mead, an “other which is an organization of attitudes.” Nonetheless, both theorists affirm that these social processes reside within the individual members of the group. Mead’s theory always remains psychological (even if social) and Durkheim postulates the existence of a dichotomous being both individual and social.

Durkheim and Mead recognized a level of relativism within society that was also

popular among scholars of the time, particularly in literature. Both make statements recognizing society as contingent when elaborating their conceptions of the “collective consciousness” and the “generalized other” in relation to crime in society. Durkheim observes:

It is thus [the opposition that exists between crime of any kind and certain collective sentiments] which, far from deriving from the crime, constitutes the crime. In other words, we should not say that an act offends the collective consciousness because it is criminal, but that it is criminal because it offends that consciousness (1984: 40).

Durkheim explains that crime is normal and its primary qualification is that it offends the “collective consciousness” making crime and thus society relative to the spontaneous development of “collective consciousness” specific to the place and time (forms of crime vary across time and space). Similarly, Mead alludes to the inherent relativity of the “generalized other” in his comment:

The criminal as such is the individual who lives in a very small group, and then makes depredations upon the larger community of which he is not a member. He is taking the property that belongs to others, but he himself does not belong to the community that recognizes and preserves the rights of property (1972: 265).

The criminal then belongs, according to Mead, to a “community of a narrow diameter” (1972: 265). I infer from this discussion that he implies a position of social relativity in the formation of the “generalized other” which then leads to conflict between its various abstractions resulting in crime. The works of their contemporaries, Hugo, Zola and Dickens dealing with the relativity of crime come to mind.

Organic solidarity is an ideal construct that Durkheim employs to highlight movement or change from one type of social integration to another. Durkheim indicates

this tendency when stating: “mechanical solidarity, which at first is isolated, or almost so should progressively lose ground, and organic solidarity gradually becomes preponderant” (1984: 126). As the division of labor increases, the level of social integration and solidarity should also rise as a result of interdependence (68). Durkheim specifically states this:

Social harmony derives from the division of labor. Its characteristic feature is that it consists of a co-operation that is automatically produced by the fact that each person follows his own interest. It is enough for every individual to devote himself to one special function to discover that inevitably he is solidly linked to other people (1984: 149).

However, in later works Durkheim begins to emphasize the secondary role he had ascribed to the collective consciousness. The collective consciousness begins to take on a more central position within Durkheim’s topography. It is through the “collective consciousness” that people become aware of this interdependence, it is the force that balances the individuation created by the division of labor.

Along a similar intellectual trajectory, Mead describes a gradual movement over time to a “universal society” (1972: 281). This is achieved in the varying forms of processual expansion manifested mainly in the forms of religious and economic communication. These processes expand their fields of discourse by gradually absorbing larger portions of individuals and social groups, and thus consequently increase the scope of the “generalized other” (1972: 257-61, 267, 281-4). The economy expands by bringing increasing amounts of individuals into the process of consumption, while religious forces aspire for universal salvation. Mead notes: “There is in human society a universality that expresses itself very early in two different ways—one on the religious

side and the other on the economic side. These processes as social processes are universal. They provide ends which any form that makes use of the same medium of communication can enter upon” (1972: 281). Mead goes on to describe a process in which religion attempts to, “bring the various individuals into a certain spiritual group in which they would recognize themselves as members of one society” (282). Furthermore, Mead recognizes the same process in economic expansion: “An economic society defines itself in so far as one individual may trade with others; and then the very processes themselves go on integrating, bringing a closer and closer relationship between communities which may be definitely opposed to each other politically” (282). Finally, Mead notes that it is communication that is at the base of this social integration: “The universe of discourse within which people can express themselves makes possible the bringing-together of those organized attitudes which represent the life of these different communities into such relationship that they can lead to a higher organization” (284).

I suggest that for both Durkheim and Mead these ideal ends, “organic solidarity” and “universal discourse,” are advanced through the expansion of the “collective consciousness” and “generalized other,” which ultimately they both use when explaining the process of social integration. However, for Durkheim this integration is facilitated through the division of labor and the collective consciousness; and for Mead it is through process of communication. For Mead the processes of communication are mediated through economic and religious institutions, while for Durkheim, interestingly enough, the division of labor and the collective consciousness are at their core economic and

religious sentiments. It is important to note that both these processes are but labels for a type of experience that erupts from co-existence, from sociality. In pointing to these parallel logics, it is possible to make a final argument by suggesting that Durkheim's earlier statement on crime could easily include Mead's terminology without sacrificing its meaning. For example, it would read, "we should not say that an act offends the (generalized other) because it is criminal, but it is criminal because it offends the (generalized other)" (Durkheim, 1984: 40; Mead, 1972: 44).

The Decline of Social Context

Durkheim fundamentally argues that meaning and satisfaction in life are created and fulfilled in the participation of a shared common social experience, one fused with common beliefs, practices and habits. Morality arises, practically erupts, within this common and shared social experience (1961). That is, a spontaneous development of social context promoting behaviors, which properly address the common struggle for existence, becomes what Durkheim describes as the "common consciousness" to which Durkheim places in relation "individual consciousness." This common experience is borne out of the shared physical and social environment that demands specific actions of cooperation, which promote the survival of the social group (1984: 208).

Over time the imperatives of the social environment, many of which are latent within social behaviors, become manifest within a coherent set of beliefs or cosmology. This cosmology comes to be understood by Durkheim as the collective consciousness or for Mead as the generalized other, what is important about the collective consciousness

is that it comes to mediate the experiences of individuals—that is to say it comes to provide a common context for social experience. For the later Durkheim, the force of the division of labor can be socially integrating only to the extent that the collective consciousness (or myth) provides the context in which these increasingly individual experiences become understood as a common and interdependent experience in the struggle of survival. Conversely, the social experience derived from the division of labor becomes an anomic force of separation and predation, without the structurally integrating element of the collective consciousness (1984: 39, 120, 291).

Using mainly Durkheim's writings on the collective consciousness and other ideas, but also bringing other works to bear on my discussion, I attempt to illustrate how the collective consciousness lies at the base of the social context in which everyday behavior occurs and allows for its shared meaning and understanding.

Social Context

With this theoretical background I observe that our current social context has become increasingly fragmented, *decontextualized*, as a result of social derangement, especially as we have come to depend on symbols and images that are devoid of contextual representation. Social experience itself has become increasingly simulated. A short discussion of Durkheim and Mead, particularly their work on symbols and society, which provide the underlying framework for social communication, will further shed light on the relations between pragmatism and sociology (particularly the sociology of Durkheim) and the contemporary postmodern society.

Following the Merriam-Webster definition of context as, “the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs,” I refer to this common experience within a specific physical and social reality that leads to a common consciousness as social context. I do not wish to suggest social context as a novel theoretical construct; rather I note, as Durkheim does, that new terms when “not absolutely necessary, [are] not without [their] disadvantages.” I simply wish to subscribe a “restricted sense” to the notion of social context corresponding to the conditions of common experience that give rise to a common consciousness as a collection of common beliefs, practices and habits (1984: 39).

By critically understanding pragmatism, Durkheim was in a position to shed further light on the notion of social context. In pragmatism's contention of experience as fundamentally associated with truth and action, Durkheim saw the notion of truth as embedded within existence, and therefore as contingent upon contextual elements. In fact Durkheim mentions that Pragmatists provide an elementary understanding of social context:

The idea only is true and only becomes true when we have used it, tried and tested it, and when it has enabled us to reconcile old truths and new truths. Truth thus ‘happens to an idea’ and is the result of an effort which has made it true. The word ‘truth’ is simply a designation of that function which consists in marrying previous parts of experience with newer parts (1983: 52).

This is to say that the pragmatists work upon the conception or experience of ‘truth’ parallels the effort made by Durkheim in his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* to demonstrate that ‘reason’ is a human construction and therefore contingent upon time and place.

Durkheim goes on to explore the pragmatist fervor for individual experience. He faults the Pragmatists as “failing to recognize the duality that exists between the mentality, which results from individual experiences and that which results from collective experiences” (1983: 68). Durkheim charges that by constraining reality within individual experiences (or contexts) the pragmatists fail to explain the imposing character of mental categories such as truth—in other words, impersonal experiences. However, were Durkheim aware of Mead’s work within pragmatism he would acknowledge that he comes a long way in reconciling this problem, when for example Mead notes that “the social process of experience [is] prior (in a rudimentary form) to the existence of mind” (1972: 50). Furthermore, Mead argues that language is composed of significant gestures and symbols that have the characteristic of calling forth or demanding common responses, which aid in the survival of the social group (1972: 69). Again, note the emphasis in Mead, as is in Durkheim’s, of common responses aiding in the survival of the social group. Later, I return to this idea in illustrating how, in my opinion, these common responses have been-- perhaps not totally lost-- but become increasingly fragmented in today’s American society.

Fundamentally for Mead, minds, selves and societies are dependent upon communication, which in turn relies upon both vocal and non-vocal language or a system of significant symbols. This system of significant symbols comes about as a result of a social context in which a shared social experience produces symbols that have shared meaning and thus are true and significant. This coincides, and is not surprising, with James’ understanding of the malleability of truth; furthermore, the fact that

significant symbols, which are produced by human experience, call forth common responses is an indicator to their accuracy (truth) as representations.

Likewise Durkheim argues that language provides a framework for the existence of society, “language is social in the highest degree; it has been elaborated by society” (1961: 69). In developing his argument Durkheim implies that language creates a particular social mentality and that this mentality is foundational: “language is not merely a system of words; each language implies a particular mentality, that of the society which speaks it, which thus expresses its own temperament, and it is this mentality which provides the foundation for individual mentality” (1961: 69). Durkheim states that society elaborates language implying to a large extent that language may in a crude way precede society, a position similar to that of Mead. Furthermore, Durkheim provides “his own” description of social context when describing the process in which men become moral by addressing themselves to common rather than individual objects: “Various other sentiments have the same significance—those which attach us to things other than men, to which we are related, such as animals, or the things surrounding us, such as birthplaces, etc” (1961: 83). In this passage we find a situation in which the social-physical environment creates a context for a shared social experience and existence, a shared meaning of objects and representations manifesting yet again in common beliefs, practices and habits characteristic of the collective consciousness.

The De-contextualization of Society

For the purpose of critique, I suggest that a force allowing for the derangement of social contexts, as a binding common experience, as proposed in the works of Durkheim and Mead, is well underway in American culture. This social de-contextualization has steadily occurred over the 20th century and continues alarmingly into the 21st century. By this I imply that the “collective consciousness” and the “generalized other” appear to be increasingly dependent upon manufactured abstractions rather than spontaneous social experiences, which remain important premises in both Durkheim’s and Mead’s work. In a sense what I suggest is unfolding, and more importantly expanding, in American society is not unlike what Schopenhauer might call a lack of harmony between the will and representations. Durkheim alludes to this very phenomenon when he writes;

Forcing reason back upon experience causes it to disappear, for it is equivalent to reducing the universality and necessity which characterize it to pure appearance, to an illusion which may be useful practically, but which corresponds to nothing in reality; consequently it is denying all objective reality to the logical life, whose regulation and organization is the function of categories (1965: 27).

Although, Durkheim’s statement was originally an epistemological critique of empiricism, its logic can be extended into a critique of contemporary society, which would have perhaps been accepted by Durkheim, albeit in a metaphysical vein. As such I suggest, following Durkheim’s reasoning, that society today has increasingly become dominated by “illusions,” which some people or groups may find useful, but which “correspond to nothing in reality” and which ultimately result in “denying all objective reality” (1965: 27). It seems that for Durkheim, a life increasingly lived in illusion is one

lacking in social context, in that experiences are increasingly second handed events performed on screens and devoid of reference points.

If, as Durkheim postulates, language provides a societal mentality that serves as the basis of individual mentality, and if we accept Mead's understanding of language as communication and social organization; then changes in the way we communicate are having radical consequences for both social and individual mentalities as well as social and individual organization. As such, I imply, along the lines of Durkheim and Mead's thought and in agreement with Baudrillard that changes in the way we communicate—what Mead would call significant symbols; or what Durkheim might regard as components of the collective consciousness—have taken place as a result of the manner in which communication technology has unfolded. Following Durkheim and to some extent Baudrillard, I further suggest that an anomic force or event has created a situation necessary for the derangement of social experience; and as such has also led to the increasing derangement of communication, as social fact, with far reaching consequences for social life.

Thus the conditions of postmodernity are not necessarily a spontaneous occurrence as some theorists hold, but rather, as Durkheim might postulate, the result of an anomic force, coinciding with the increasing derangement of human society. That is to say, the understanding of the postmodern condition as the logical extension and evolution of the modern condition is not the only suitable account of contemporary society. Rather, there exists the explanation that the postmodern condition represents a

transitory state brought on by destabilizing effects within modernity, and that society is in the process of reorienting itself around new significant symbols, hopefully sooner rather than later (Ritzer, 1997). This anomie or deranged human desire was the subject of attention in the work of prominent 20th century thinkers and thus its various dimensions and underlying forces were characterized and appeared in their work. For example, liquid modernity for Bauman, hyper-reality for Baudrillard, the lost individual for Dewey, irony and contingency for Rorty, deconstruction for Derrida, and other-directedness for Riesman are all examples of social facts which to an extent have resulted from a change in the manner society communicates the significant symbols of the collective consciousness. These changes have created a void in the regulation of social life; thus allowing for social de-contextualization. Even to the extent, as Mestrovic argues, that emotions are manipulated in a post-emotional society, this becomes possible only when the existing discourse of the time allows for a de-contextualization of the foundations for social life. Thus, I suggest as an example (following Mestrovic) that the lack of social context of high profile trials for Americans (those living outside the actual experience of the trial), and the attempt of television media to make this irrelevance relevant for the purpose of drawing an audience, allowed or facilitated the deconstruction and reframing of the trial in whatever perspective was deemed profitable, murder, racism, genocide, etc (1997: 5-6, 49). And so we have a process where communication through television, as Mestrovic identifies, is one of staged experience, one of forced representation.

The gradual breakdown of the earlier forms of discourse and the rise of an image based discourse, what Baudrillard referred to as hyper-reality, may be largely attributed to the “coming of age” of television in the 20th century and the computer in the 21st century, and their almost complete takeover of the media of communication. Television as a means of communication primarily relies on images, appearances, and the forcing of universals (abstractions, representations) onto particulars (experience, existence, will) as opposed to their harmony, what Baudrillard has described in *Simulacra and Simulation* as the preponderance of models to not only replace reality, but to actively construct it.

As the Internet challenges the undisputed role of television in the 21st century, the centrality of the image-based discourse continues and parallels the earlier emphasis, with perhaps the introduction of anonymity in the centers of bilateral Internet discourse. To this extent it is no coincidence that high speed Internet relies on the same technology as cable television. Television as a form of communication effectively provides a context-free form of communication, in which what is significant ceases to be what is common and becomes what is individual, ceases to be what is experienced and becomes what is represented.

Furthermore, the rich experiential elements of communication are torn away as information increasingly flows unilaterally—that is in one direction top down. This creates a situation in which the placid viewer can only respond in one of two ways “I am watching” or “I am not watching.” Effectively television is one of the sources of anomie responsible for the de-contextualization of contemporary society.

With the average shot (image) on television lasting roughly 3.5 seconds, the old proverb comes to mind “a picture is worth a thousand words” (Postman 86). It is important because a picture or image’s ability to represent a thousand words does not come about in its depth of description, but rather in its lack of context or openness of interpretation. In reproduced images there exists no social context in which to understand the image as part of some logical experience, what matters most in an image is what it appears to mean, which is based on its aesthetic appeal. As Postman remarks an image “offers no assertions to refute, so it is not refutable” (73). This would be harmless enough if the image presented were understood simply as irrelevant. However, Baudrillard’s genealogy provides another level of understanding in which the image does not simply mask reality, or further removed, lack a relation to reality, but rather is one in which the image precedes reality—a model from which reality is simulated. He notes “the successive phases of the image”:

It is the reflection of a profound reality;
It masks and denatures a profound reality;
It masks the absence of a profound reality;
It has no relation to any reality whatsoever;
It is its own pure simulacrum. (1994: 8)

The image as simulacrum has obtained a pivotal point in the social event, one that allows it to create a reality rather than to be of a reality. Mestrovic describes a similar phenomenon in his *The Coming Fin De Siècle*; “The postmodernist viewer becomes the passive consumer of images whose imagination atrophies, because the media supplies the images ready-made” (1991:3-4). As such the image becomes a

springboard (from which to catapult the individual into hyperspace) for social de-contextualization, in which meaning is left to the individual to discover, to create or to be manipulated by the logic of the image. Thus an image is worth a thousand words to the extent that it creates a context free effect, in which meaning becomes fleeting.

For Durkheim the preponderance of individual as opposed to common meaning, resulting from a lack of a social context that ascribes common meaning is a form of anomie. One in which there is no social regulation of the meaning of social discourse, where individuals create meaning not based on a shared social context but based instead on individual will. This will or intuition as a result of not being grounded in common social experience, even if aligning with representations, aligns with representations that are forced upon the world of experience. And since Americans spend more time in front of TV screens than in anything else, we can assume that society communicates what is significant, that is its collective consciousness through television. Even if we assume that it is not communicating anything significant, the fact that it is the predominant form of communication, begs us to ask what then are individuals creating as significant? What sort of collective consciousness are individuals assimilating, from the insignificance and irrelevance of television? It is no mere coincidence that of all the religious laws encoded in Britain during the time Durkheim chose to make reference in *Suicide* to one “forbidding stage representations of any character from Holy Scripture” (1966: 161). Thus it seems he was fully aware of the effects staged experiences or forced representations for the sake of entertainment can have on the collective consciousness.

In what remains of this chapter, I elaborate on how Durkheim's conception of the collective consciousness is being undermined by a type of communication, which destroys social context. That is, a type of communication which denies a common social environment of experience, one in which a strong and relevant collective consciousness can develop. Specifically this type of social de-contextualization is having profound effects on our government, and its ability to promote the common good.

The Political Image and Anomie

In particular and increasingly, the executive branch led by the office of the President of the United States is characterized in terms of images; the president is now discussed in terms of representing the "image" of America to the world. During the last several elections it has been explicitly stated that the type of image, as opposed to ideals, that particular candidates present would be of importance when conducting the responsibilities of the presidency. This emphasis on image is characteristic of the discourse of television, the medium in which most of our politics now takes place. Where, for example, given the time in which candidates have to elaborate ideas during debates, it becomes more facile to give the appearance of knowledge rather than to articulate political ideas. As such Presidential debates become oriented at entertaining rather bringing valid experiences and ideas to the political table, where the winner is decided by who gave off the best appearance, which is frequently characterized as who didn't alienate voters. Candidates often do this by de-contextualizing their platform,

allowing for the existence of contradictory statements and very general ideas that do not coincide with reality.

The first term candidacy of George W. Bush defined him in terms of a certain image: “the type of guy you could have a beer with,” as opposed to Gore who, the Bush media argued, gave the impression of a “robot.” Interestingly the media commented on how often Gore and Bush seemed to agree on policies, implying an increased reliance on image in the election process. Bush’s presidential campaign for his second term in office was decisively marked by 9/11. For this campaign, the image changed; now the image was the “tough guy” or “the protector.” This image of toughness, his campaign would repeat incessantly, would be necessary and decisive for the US to succeed in keeping Al Qaeda away from its boundaries. Kerry, on the other hand, was described as liberal or “soft” on war. This image of softness was expected to raise doubts among Americans as to his ability to command and more specifically he, it was presumed under this image, would not be able to prevent another attack. In this manner the image would raise fear among Americans, especially of another attack by Al Qaeda. These impressions of toughness or softness had nothing to do with the real lives of these men. During the Vietnam War, while George Bush used his father’s influence to seek deferments and a place in the Texas National Guard, Kerry was actually fighting the war and became a decorated war hero. This de-contextualized image, grounded on nothing, came to define these two candidates and an entire presidential campaign. We then see, as Mestrovic states, a manipulation of emotions, leading individuals to rely on intuition, which instead of corresponding to a social context, corresponds to forced representations via television.

These de-contextualized images, which came to define these candidates are at their best useful to a particular few and at their worst “illusions” corresponding to nothing and denying the objective reality of the elections (Durkheim, 1965: 27; Mestrovic, 1997: 56).

Similarly, images were decisive during the 2008 campaign for the presidency, the media indicated that more people gave support to Obama because he gave the impression of “youth” and “progress,” as opposed to McCain whose image was “old;” or to the extent that McCain’s image was associated with the image of the Bush administration (towards the end of his Presidency Bush became characterized as a “fool” and “warmonger”). Each of these characterizations is based not on the ideas of these individuals, their real life experiences, or their biographies to paraphrase Mills; but rather on images crafted by expert image gurus, or social “illusionist” if you will. These images of presidents created by Madison Avenue are based on ideal abstractions or representations and not rooted in reality, or even and most importantly, the shared American experience, but forced upon the experience of the public by televised discourse. For example, it is in this line of reasoning that the term “electability” has come about to describe the quality of being elected, based not on experience or ideas, but on ratings. Thus “Bush is tough on war” (the image), as opposed to the actuality of the experiences where those qualities were truly manifested in their lives: Bush avoided war and used his father’s influence to stay home. The fact that elections are today decided on the appearance of qualities and not real life biographies is not the occurrence of some random new social fact, but, I suggest, the outcome of what Durkheim would refer to as

a derangement of social life, spurred by the expansion of television to even some of the most distant corners of the world.

The rise of Sarah Palin again provides additional evidence of this phenomenon. Almost unknown to the American public and electorate, she rose as a media favorite from a short appearance a few days preceding the Republican National Convention, detailing the significance of television media. Practically in a day she rose from an unknown to almost a household name and this rise was not rooted in any real experience, achievement or effort on her part; but on the image she portrayed on the media. Repeatedly, the media exhorted her qualities; she was attractive and photogenic and displayed a real connection with her media audience. These “image” qualities supported her rise as a media favorite. The media and US audiences found her attractive and photogenic and displaying certain media energy; further superficial attributes were spoken about: her glamour eyewear, her expensive clothing, for example became the decisive elements in her rise to fame. Without much experience or substance, she gave the appearance of being invested on a super conservative agenda which immediately made her welcome among a selected group of Republicans. And this woman, or rather this image, was spoken about during the years to come as a very viable candidate for the presidency in 2012; again highlighting the nothingness of the representation, but the supremacy of the image in these very important events where Americans elect their president. Presidential candidates become objects of consumption. And again this is being repeated during the frenzy of the current Republican presidential debates where already by mid January 2012, the count was up to seventeen. The contemporary state of

politics is one the founding fathers were well aware could occur; for example in the Federalist Papers, Jay, writing under the pseudonym Publius, notes that something similar to a weak collective consciousness at a national level would allow, “party zeal, taking advantage of the supineness, the ignorance, and the hopes and fears of the unwary and interested, [to] often place men in office by the votes of a small proportion of the electors” (John Jay, 1961: 391).

In contemporary U.S. society there is a dependence on a type of communication, which facilitates the de-contextualization of social reality. Creating in its midst the anomic consumption of the collective consciousness, directed at individual instead of common social experience. If Baudrillard’s claim that the logic of television, or of the screen more generally, is one in which history, or more broadly knowledge, becomes accelerated to the point of escape velocity by simulation (by its reproduction upon the screen)—that is the news event by virtue of being televised loses its reference to reality—is true, then we are left with a situation in which the advent of television has unleashed an anomic form of the collective consciousness (Baudrillard, 1994: 2-5). Because this form of collective consciousness has lost its reference to reality, its imposing quality becomes fleeting and thus comes to be structured around individual as opposed to collective discourses. A collective consciousness primarily based on the individual is one that cannot fundamentally provide a social context of experience, since reality becomes nothing more than an entertaining “illusion” around a manipulation of experience that denies “all objective reality.” In other words it is a situation in which the regulation and organization of social life begins to weaken as a result of its inability to

function as categories in an irrelevant and lost society (Durkheim, 1965: 27; Mestrovic, 1984: 1993,1997).

The next chapter shifts emphasis from a Durkheimian perspective to a Meadian one. This shift is used primarily as a tool in clarifying the metaphysics of the postmodern condition according to Rorty. Rorty's work is selected because of its unique place within the history of both pragmatism and postmodernism. For example, Ritzer locates Rorty, along with Freud and Nietzsche, at a metaphysical level in relation to postmodernism—that is, Rorty's work is seen as achieving a foundation from which postmodernism can unfold (1997). Furthermore, both Hickman and Koopman locate Rorty within the history of pragmatism, to which Mead subscribed and to which Durkheim had much to write about, as a neo -pragmatist. As such Rorty's work lends itself easily to a discussion concerned with sociology, postmodernism and pragmatism.

CHAPTER III

LANGUAGE PLAY AND LANGUAGE GAMES

Of Rorty and Mead

If we were to suspend time and imagine a conversation between Rorty and Mead, I suggest that several interesting questions would come to mind. Why would these two great minds engage in a conversation? What, if anything, would make them converse? Finally and particularly appealing: Why is this conversation important? These questions serve to structure this chapter and at a more personal level provided the intellectual motivation that guided the writing. If we then use these questions as providing the starting point for the conversation, it seems that this imaginary dialogue between Rorty and Mead could function as a catalyst in formulating interesting parallels in their work and eventually aid and enrich the process of sociological inquiry. For example, what are the parallels between “language games” for Rorty and “the game” for Mead? Do the qualities of the liberal ironist fall closer to the “play” or “game” end of social activity? What import or importance do these connections have for understanding contemporary social behavior?

I suggest that posing these questions in a simulated conversationalist style between the two will permit the juxtaposing of their work and ideas and allow us to better situate Rorty within sociological debates, as well as highlight the relevance of Mead’s theories for critiquing contemporary culture.

Why would Rorty and Mead engage in a conversation? I argue that it would make sense for them to converse because they shared common intellectual roots, which at times diverged; but which, nonetheless are sufficiently similar to provoke a discussion between the two. The purpose of this figurative conversation would be centered on a fruitful discussion of their distinctive ideas which, as suggested above, have many conceptual parallels; however distinctive each thought these ideas were at the time of his writing and which may be argued perhaps have these parallels because of a shared intellectual legacy. For purposes of this essay, I have selected a few, but salient ideas, posited by Rorty and Mead in order to illustrate their conceptual similarities.

First, it is important to highlight their shared intellectual roots, although contested by some. Like Mead, Rorty considers himself to be a pragmatist, following in the footsteps of Peirce, James and especially Dewey. This shared beginning is muddled in contemporary debates, whereby many of Rorty's critics refer to his work as resembling a type of neo-pragmatism; that is, one informed by pragmatist thought, but transformed by the linguistic turn in philosophy (Koopman, 2009). Still, others clump his scholarship into a growing body of philosophical and social thought roughly labeled postmodernism (Hickman, 2007; Ritzer 1997). Postmodernism is associated with a position within cultural thought that insists on a critical re-evaluation of objective social reality with an emphasis on the relativity of language, social constructions and truth.

Second, Rorty incorporates a vocabulary, which closely resembles that of Mead; for example, Rorty's use of "language game" is a concept that I argue parallels Mead's

description of “the game.” It seems that however we choose to situate Rorty: the pragmatist, the neo-pragmatist or the postmodernist, one thing becomes increasingly evident; Rorty develops an intellectual argument in which Mead is highly relevant. It is precisely this relevance that is highlighted here in order to suggest the intellectual and conceptual linkages that connect the works of these two philosophers and their relevance to the intellectual heritage of the two disciplines of sociology and philosophy. Its importance is warranted by the significant contribution of Mead’s work to the theoretical development of Sociology.

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty succeeds, in my opinion, in shifting the cultural debate from an overly confining, stable and structural or structured view of language to a view that is exceedingly unregulated, precarious and individualistic. Rorty’s aim is to un-privilege; what he describes as, the “language game.” In so doing, he brings our collective attention to the benefits of what I refer to as “language play.” He attempts to counter act the “language game,” a view he critiques as repressive, traditional and antiquated, by proposing that “language play” is better able to enhance the range of our “final vocabularies,” making it a more useful tool for contemporary social life. “Language play” characterizes the activity to which Rorty refers to as the “liberal ironist”; or in other words, the ideal member of a liberal society. Furthermore, he argues that the activity of the “liberal ironist” is the form of social activity best suited for achieving contemporary solidarity (1989: 44, 84). In order to fully make sense of the parallels that I describe between Rorty’s ideas and concepts and those of Mead’s, it becomes indispensable at this point to introduce Mead’s pragmatic sociology.

Mead

In *Mind, Self and Society*, Mead presents self-consciousness as a process that is composed of the balance between ideal forms of social experience: “play” and “the game.” Mead argues that these forms are mediated by communication and that they aid in the growth and stability of self-consciousness (1972: 152-64). I believe that Mead’s vocabulary is of sufficient depth to allow me to provide a “familiar place” within a “language game” to make sense for Rorty’s metaphors. Or, in Rorty’s own words, it will allow me to relegate his description to “what most sentences of our language are dead metaphors” (1989: 18). I propose that by inserting Rorty’s concepts and ideas into Mead’s argument, we can draw an understanding of the manner in which Rorty centers self-consciousness around instability—towards what Dewey might refer to as an excessive emphasis on the precarious nature of experience. And in so doing, we can begin to anticipate the role balance plays in the quest for freedom and solidarity within society at large.

Mead’s understanding of “play” and “the game” can be applied on a much broader social level than his examples of the simple activities of children imply. Mead writes, “[a] set of background factors in the genesis of the self is presented in the activities of play and the game” (1972: 149). I wish to dwell on this passage, since it helps to understand its wider social implications. If selves are contingent upon these “background factors,” that is, the characteristic qualities of “play” and “game.” And if self-consciousness is a process of ongoing social development, then it seems that one

may rightfully conclude that the characteristic qualities that mark and differentiate “play” and “the game” are important elements in maintaining and expanding self-consciousness, not only in childhood but well into adulthood. Mead recognizes “play” as a form of unorganized activity in which the relationships among the various roles individuals assume are indeterminate and precarious. Mead writes:

The child is one thing at one time and another at another, and what he is at one moment does not determine what he is at another. That is both the charm of childhood as well as its inadequacy. You cannot count on the child, you cannot assume that all the things he does are going to determine what he will do at any moment. He is not organized into a whole. The child has no definite character, no definite personality (1972: 159).

Childhood is seen here as a stage or period during the life of the individual, which is marked by excessive “play” and thus the individual that is characterized by this period is considered a child. Mead distinguishes “play” by describing this form of social activity as one in which the individual is not confined by the organizing elements the game provides. But one in which they are free, to an extent, to negotiate the stimuli, responses and attitudes of others into roles in accordance to their own will in what he perceives to be a more or less disorganized fashion. This description of “play” marks it as an important foundation of the self, an aspect that promotes the unique, creative and precarious elements of social experience and assists in the growth of self-consciousness through the expansion of the “generalized other.”

Contrary to “play,” the “game” is characterized by organized activity in which the relationships among the various roles are determinate and stable—that is, roles have social meaning. The spontaneous development of social meaning is facilitated by the

demands “the game” makes upon individuals. In “the game,” individuals who assume roles are almost utterly required to have an understanding of the roles taken by others in order to function. Roles, positions or places within the game, only make sense to the extent that one considers the other roles, positions or places involved in the social activity. “The game” therefore creates determinacy between its various roles, positions or places allowing for individuals to take or assume the “role of the other” and further providing a framework for the organization of self. The usefulness of this stability is seen in its ability to direct individuals in common activity toward common goals in order to meet the common struggle for survival. Mead says:

The game has logic, so that such an organization of the self is rendered possible: there is a definite end to be obtained; the actions of the different individuals are all related to each other with reference to that end so that they do not conflict; one is not in conflict with himself in the attitude of another man on the team (1972: 158-9).

For Mead, “the game” is characteristic of the stable nature of experience thus serving an important function for individuals within society by providing for them their unity of self. It allows individuals to adhere to common social objects of orientation and pursuit, and gives common meaning to their diverse individual activity (perhaps this is what is missing in Dewey’s lost individual). Where “play” simply organizes the stimuli, responses and attitudes of others into roles (established and novel), ‘the game’ fits these roles into a larger network of interrelated conditions of common or social meaning – Rorty might say that “the game” finds places for metaphors, it assigns to them a stable meaning (1989: 18). Furthermore, “the game” is important because unlike “play,” whose activity enlarges the “generalized other,” but doesn’t necessarily encourage the taking of

the “generalized other,” the “game” perforce compels individuals to assume the “generalized other” in their mutual interaction. In other words, for Mead, the spontaneous, authentic and legitimate “generalized other” is the flower of the balance between social activity whose elements resemble that of “play” and “the game.”

Rorty

As previously mentioned, Rorty operates under a similar vocabulary as Mead, primarily through his emphasis on language and his use of the concept of the “language game.” Rorty, however, is very elusive in his use of this concept; he never quite defines or describes it in one holistic manner. Rather, his preferred choice of getting at its meaning is to “re-describe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it” (1989: 9). Rorty uses this method throughout *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, never defining these terms but instead using them to describe various phenomena. As such, one must arrive at what more or less Rorty is getting at when using concepts like “language game” in a rather piecemeal fashion.

First, Rorty begins by positioning himself away from the “idea that there is a fixed task for language to perform” (1989: 13). He implies that once we align our vocabularies with that of Davidson and Wittgenstein and stop thinking of language as a medium of representation, as something that is increasingly approaching reality, we unavoidably lose the idea that language has a purpose (16). Rorty struggles to move away from the idea that language is getting at something which is not socially

constructed, something which is “out there” in reality or “in here” within self-consciousness. By accepting this vocabulary, Rorty seems to wish one to realize that the task or aim of a language is necessarily contingent and not, as he argues, an “a-historical reality” (1989). The “language game,” or rather the description of social life as one in which “language games” are regarded as vital, is to indicate that language can provide or direct individuals towards useful ends. And thus, we arrive at one of the basic elements of the “language game,” as Rorty understands it; that is, it has a fixed task, an aim, a direction, a purpose—or in other words—a project (1989).

The second quality of the “language game” is that it is logical; it is organized to the extent that its various parts are more or less determinate and stable; in other words, it makes sense. Rorty only hints at the logical quality of the “language game” and provides no clearly articulated position regarding this element; it is one I infer from his descriptions. For example, when Rorty says “to have meaning is to have a place in a language game,” this implies that there is a level of determinacy between places within a language game so that to have a place in a language game is to have a determinate position, one whose relationship to other places is relatively stable and thus significant (1989: 18). Perhaps Rorty’s most fleshed out understanding of the “language game” comes from this passage:

If certain topics and certain “language games” were taboo – if there were general agreement within society that certain questions were always in point, that certain questions were prior to certain others, that there was a fixed order of discussion, and that flanking movements were not permitted. That would be just the sort of society which liberals are trying to avoid – one in which “logic” ruled and “rhetoric” was outlawed. It is central to the idea of liberal society that, in respect

to words as opposed to deeds, persuasion as opposed to force, anything goes (1989: 51-2).

What Rorty seems to be describing in this passage is the determinacy of the “language game.” Like “the game” for Mead, the “language game” has logic; questions only make sense when considering other questions and accounting for the fixed order of discussion. Furthermore, “flanking movements” – that is roles, places or positions that do not lie within the fixed order, what Rorty regards as metaphors, are not allowed, further allowing the stable quality of the “language game” to flourish (1989: 51-2). The liberal society Rorty describes, emphasizes “rhetoric” and the state of “anything goes” as necessary elements of contemporary society; qualities which are uncannily familiar to Mead’s description of “play” as one in which there is no “definite character” and no “organized whole” (Rorty, 1989: 74).

The final quality of the “language game” to be discussed here is that “the game” provides the conditions for the development of social meaning. For Rorty, metaphors, which are the most important quality of language, lie outside the language game; thus they have no place within it and this leads their meaning to become disputed, chaotic and precarious (1989: 35). Metaphors that remain in this disputed and precarious state; that do not catch on with other people, that is, they do not find a common use, become relegated to what Rorty, and Freud with him, would refer to as the individuals’ unique “fantasy” (Freud, 1984). Those metaphors that do find a common use become known as “poetry” or “philosophy” rather than “fantasy” (37). Rorty insinuates that a “culture of fantasy,” that is a way of life that is increasingly dominated by individual fantasies as

opposed to one where common philosophy dominates is one which contemporary society would do well to adopt. Rorty describes the faculty of the “language game” to reveal common meaning when he writes: “when common sense is challenged, its adherents respond at first by generalizing and making explicitly the rules of the language game they are accustomed to play” (74). I take Rorty to be describing a process whereby common meaning – also described by Durkheim as collective consciousness—comes about or is developed within the rules; that is within the stability of the “language game” (Durkheim, 1984).

Rorty increasingly seems to be describing the “language game” along strikingly similar lines of understanding as Mead’s description of “the game.” One could very well rewrite Mead’s description of the game by using Rorty’s vocabulary and sacrifice little of the significance of its meaning, as illustrated in the passage below.

The [language game] has logic, so that such an organization of the self is rendered possible: there is a definite end to be obtained; the actions of the different individuals are all related to each other with reference to that end so that they do not conflict; one is not in conflict with himself in the attitude of another man on the team (Mead, 1972: 158-9).

For Rorty the “language game” has an aim, direction or purpose, it is logical and its roles, places or positions are determinate and coincide within one another; and lastly it provides a context for shared social experience and the development of common meaning. Although, one cannot help but think that Rorty would fundamentally disagree with the implied benefits this redescription affords the “language game.”

In contrast, we have seen that the activities of Rorty's liberal ironist lie much closer to Mead's description of "play" rather than "the game." Rorty elaborates the qualities of the liberal ironists as those who are "never quite able to take themselves seriously because they are always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves" (1989: 73-4). Rorty even goes as far as to call this type of activity "playful" (39).

Furthermore, as already mentioned, Rorty argues that individuals clothe themselves in fantasy, in their own personal metaphors, and that we live in a society in which "flanking movements" are possible, rhetoric rules and anything goes—that is, a society in which constant "re-description" is allowed and encouraged. Hence, the previous illustrations that were made in reference to the "language game" and "the game" are similarly applicable here to the concepts of "language play" and "play." By situating Rorty's vocabulary within, or along the same lines, as Mead's language game, we can better understand the type of social activity the liberal ironist engages in:

The [liberal ironist] is one thing at one time and another at another, and what he is at one moment does not determine what he is at another. That is both the charm of [language play] as well as its inadequacy. You cannot count on the [liberal ironist], you cannot assume that all the things he does are going to determine what he will do at any moment. He is not organized into a whole. The [liberal ironist] has no definite character, no definite personality (1972: 159).

Throughout *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty is describing a state of affairs made reference to by Peirce, but more importantly by Dewey and Mead (Rorty,

1972; Stuhr, 2000). Notice here the similarities that exist with other pragmatists, in terms of the shared roots indicated at the beginning of this essay and reinforced by a similar vocabulary and analogies. For example, Peirce might indicate that what Rorty has accomplished is the “Fixation of Doubt;” when, for example, he writes about the individual wholly in fantasy as “like a ship on the open sea, with no one on board who understands the rules of navigation” (Peirce in Stuhr, 2000: 69). Likewise, Dewey makes a similar statement when referring to the “lost individual” as adrift “without sure anchorage” (Dewey in Stuhr, 2000: 498). In *The Lost Individual*, Dewey criticizes the reality of the social conditions of his time by noting:

The significant thing is that the loyalties which once held individuals, which gave them support, direction and unity of outlook on life, have well-nigh disappeared. In consequence, individuals are confused and bewildered. It would be difficult to find in history an epoch as lacking in solid and assured objects of belief and approved ends of action as is the present. Stability of individuality is dependent upon stable objects to which allegiance firmly attaches itself (498).

I believe that Rorty’s description of the individual and society is similar to what pragmatist thinkers incorporated into their works. However, it is also important to notice that Rorty distances from the more established pragmatists when he shifts the focus from a balance on the precarious and stable (Dewey), the play and the game (Mead), of doubt and belief (Peirce); to one which centralizes the precarious, playful and doubtful elements of social experience. Here perhaps lies the confusion as to where Rorty fits in the scheme of pragmatism; or whether his work is more appropriately characterized as neo pragmatism, or even as Hickman would argue his work might be an exemplar of

post-modernism, since he indicates, it could be placed within this perspective (Hickman, 2007).

There can be no doubt that today we are in the midst of a culture inundated in the precarious, playful and doubtful, much like, or even more so, than the one Dewey was familiar with in *The Lost Individual* (Dewey in Stuhr, 2000: 498). However, where Mead and the other pragmatists recognize the importance of balancing these forces with those of stability, games, and beliefs to create unity; Rorty, attempts to establish society and the individual atop the precarious nature of social experience.

Therefore, as we bring this dialogue to an end, it is important to reiterate the underlying similarities and linkages between the ideas of Mead and Rorty. And how to a certain extent it may be possible to suggest that there are important intellectual traditions that bring the work of these two philosophers closer to each other; in particular there are striking conceptual similarities in many of their key concepts and this should be of importance to both sociologists and philosophers. Finally, sociologists who continue to elaborate on Mead's concepts and who find his theoretical contributions on the development of the self important to sociological analysis may find Rorty's concepts sufficiently important to warrant their incorporation into this body of work.

In what remains of this thesis I build upon the discussion presented in the two previous chapters on classical and contemporary conceptions of "the social." Specifically, I use the ideas presented in these chapters as a foundation from which to articulate social change and the relation of the individual to society. Of particular

importance are the works of Baudrillard and Durkheim and to a lesser extent Mead. These particular works are juxtaposed using existentialism as a bridge from which to explore the individual's alienation vis-à-vis society.

In particular these questions are discussed against the background of death and finitude, particularly relevant to the thread that has woven this thesis together, that of the social. In this last chapter death and finitude as each is presented in today's modern discourse is discussed with an atmosphere of Durkheimian and Mead's ideas on the social and alienation mediated by Baudrillard's conception of the death of the social. It is from this perspective then that I turn to the themes of death, finitude and alienation which from the point of the social clearly reveal what may be implied as the death of the social in the alienated individual.

CHAPTER IV

POSTMODERNISM, FINITUDE AND THE SOCIAL

In this chapter, I introduce the notion of finitude and death as important and relevant aspects of the social, particularly as it is manifested within the individual consciousness. In particular alienation is examined as a form of finitude and thus relevant to Baudrillard's conceptions of the "hell of the same" and "death of the social." In addition to the individuals credited above, wherein some of their ideas are used in developing this argument, I further delve into the works of the same authors that have been consistently used throughout this discussion and which have structured the various discussions presented in the previous chapters. The works of Durkheim and Mead and the postmodernists will be relied upon as this discussion on finitude and death evolves in the following paragraphs.

I begin the chapter calling attention to the profound words of Hannah Arendt, the renown mid twentieth century scholar, when discussing particular conditions and historical events of the 20th century. In particular and most appropriate here is the convincing and engulfing notion, posited in her *The Human Condition*, of cultural finitude as marked by technological and social changes during the 20th century. Juxtaposed to this notion of cultural finitude are Baudrillard's pataphysical explorations of 21st century technology and its emphasis on cloning, simulation and hyperreality—that is, on his modified Sartrean notion of "the hell of the same." In exploring this

theoretical trajectory my aim is to shed further light upon “the social” as the base sociology as well as Baudrillard’s proclamation of its death.

Fin-de-Siècle vs. Fin-de-Millennium

If the previous century could be characterized by an existential¹ sensibility, then perhaps it would be the confrontation and confirmation of a radical finitude. This contrasts Arendt’s belief that the symbolic message of the 20th century, captured by Sputnik, was humankind’s tireless search for transcendence of the human condition. As Arendt acknowledges, but places second to Sputnik, the Cold War brought to fruition the possibility that for the first time in history humankind was capable of not only obliterating itself but all life as we know it (Arendt, 1958). World War I, The Great Depression, World War II, the Holocaust, Cold War nuclear proliferation, terrorism, AIDS, and increased simulated warfare all represent ways in which the 20th century ran up against its own possible finitude.

This finitude was radical in the sense that it was not merely the confrontation of individuals, groups or even societies with death, but rather it was the confrontation of complete annihilation by the whole of human civilization. Advances in race, ethnic and gender equality, educational and political emancipation, standards of living and human dignity, for example, might well be wiped out, indeed made utterly meaningless, in the face of such mutually insured destruction. The very real possibility that the 20th century

¹ Existential sensibility is used synonymously with individual consciousness as opposed to collective consciousness. It is used to emphasize the perspective of the individual within the society-individual continuum.

could have been the last century for human being represents its quintessential existential crisis.

Comparatively, as we explode and implode into the 21st century, Hannah's words ring truer than they may have in the previous century. In contrast to the 20th century, and perhaps as a result of enduring the confrontation with radical finitude, the 21st century seems dead set on eliminating any trace of finitude. That is, the elimination of death from cultural discourses and experiences seems to be an emergent trait of the 21st century, albeit one with firm roots in history. Regenerative and reconstructive medicine, the Internet and Global Warming all represent ways in which the 21st century has begun to eclipse finitude. In this way Arendt's words are instructive in that the first "step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth" has been taken (1958). Furthermore, one might add that the first steps toward the escape of humankind's imprisonment to the body and to the social have also begun.

Finitude

To the most glaring question of a radically subjective existence, "why bother?" finitude is that which inaudibly whispers in reply, "death." Finitude then provides the necessary impetus from which to take life seriously and Durkheim, an existentially sensible sociologist, often notes that a disruption of death inevitably leads to a disruption of life. Very much along Durkheim's stream of thought, Nietzsche another contemporary noted:

Every human being knows very well that he is in this world just once, as something unique, and that no accident, however strange, will throw together a second time into unity such a curious and diffuse plurality (in Kaufman, 1965: 121).

I recognize finitude very much in line with Nietzsche's words. In this sense, finitude can be understood as the backdrop against which meaning becomes possible in human existence. Death is the canvas upon which human choices are painted and without it, nothing can ever take shape. In a sense it represents a fundamental point of reference for human existence, as indicated in Durkheim's quote above, a sort of speed of light of the social cosmos. Finitude can perhaps best be understood, for the purposes of this work, as the confrontation with human existence, as a cycle of life and death and ultimately the confirmation of this process as alienating. And the latter is very much at the center of this chapter since it is what bridges the existentialist finitude with the social and more recently, the death of the social for postmodernists. This alienation is not pathological, but rather, a naturally unfolding process of human existence, however, this does not make it any less existentially stressful.

To the extent that culture mediates human experience with existence, it becomes important to discuss the ways in which global culture today is obliterating death from our collective practices, habits, discourses and sentiments, in short from our collective consciousness, as Durkheim would note. Certainly, finitude and its utterance in everyday experience, death, still exist. I am not making the claim here that death and by extension finitude are no longer a part of nature; events end, people die and the human organism as a radical subject in society experiences all of this at a deeply personal level. Rather, I

want to highlight the increasing marginalization of death in global culture. This is an important process if one takes seriously the notion that culture provides to us the objects of human experience from which we piece together our existences.

The eclipse of death in culture implies a loss in the perceptibility of the experience of death in human existence. That is, death continues to happen, however, we are increasingly unable to sense death and as such to deal with it in a meaningful and pragmatic manner. Furthermore, this loss in our ability to confront death does not indicate that death itself has vanished; or that it continues on as before merely unnoticed; but that it massively accumulates along the margins of culture and thus threatens the very existence of the human condition. (Global warming represents one such threat that has occurred, not because we or some others chose it; but rather because as a culture we lack the ability to make sense of waste, to meaningfully incorporate finitude into consumption and thus to allow people to reconcile it existentially). This continuing loss in the perceptibility of finitude may eventually result in its irrelevance to what is considered to be ontologically human.

The dwindling of collective consciousness or what has been referred previously to as the collapse of the grand narrative, the crumbling of totalities, the end of worldviews, indeed the death of the social (these forms of finitude far from representing a way in which culture deals with finitude, represent the death of finitude in culture), has wrought with it humankind's inability to conceive of or to address the emergent conditions of existence. Humankind seems everywhere intent on destroying meaning and

eliminating difference in a world bent on subjugating death by transgressing finitude. The surgical exactness of quantification in the sciences, the de-contextualizing character of simulation in the media and the anomic nature of consumer culture push to the periphery our discourses with and experiences of death. It is on these grounds that I make the claim that modern and postmodern conditions for existence are reaching a critical mass through the elimination of finitude or of a pragmatic culmination in the process of existence. It is important to note that this critique of culture is limited to Western culture as experienced in the developed world. And, therefore, at least for the moment these trends should not be attributed to the East, Latin America or more generally to the Global South where the intensities of life and death seem to be in full eruption, perhaps even overflowing as a result of the outsourcing of finitude in the West.

Durkheim and Alienation

Baudrillard purports that we are nearing the end of alienation. Not in the sense that we are arriving at a Marxist end of history utopia, but rather that we are reaching an end of difference. According to Baudrillard, the disappearance of finitude between self and other is occurring because it “is our clone-ideal today: a subject purged of the other, deprived of its divided character and doomed to self-metastasis, to pure repetition. [It is] no longer the hell of other people, but the hell of the same” (1993: 122). In this ironic reversal of Sartre’s description of reality, Baudrillard sees in “the hell of the other” the possibility of alienation. And within his own “the hell of the same” all that is possible, as

a result of pure repetition, is boredom. It is perhaps this boredom that is becoming a new condition of human existence.

When elaborating on Baudrillard's alienation, Durkheim's work on the topic becomes important not only because he offers a sociologically informed account of the process, not restricted to a material economic order, but also because of his influence on Baudrillard's work. Of interest is that he discusses alienation without necessarily using the term and primarily through his analysis of suicide, which can be viewed as a manifestation of alienation. Many existentialists may find his position as "problematizing" the inherently existential "choicing" nature of suicide. However, Durkheim's quadrasonic view of society as composed of fatalistic, altruistic, egoistic and anomic social currents allows for the understanding of alienation as a naturally unfolding process in society, although within limits. Durkheim is interested in understanding the ways that suicide varies between and within societies as a result of the changing conditions of existence—that is, as a result of changing social currents.

These social currents cause or create conditions for alienation; to the extent that society erupts from these social currents, alienation becomes a fundamental aspect of this process. For Durkheim there can never be society without alienation, the two are coupled processes, or even co-processes. These social currents are important in works of the early sociologists, especially for Durkheim, Freud and Mead, in which society, internalized psychologically, creates a plural self, a self described as consciousness, unconsciousness and collective consciousness; a self described as "I," "Me" and the

generalized other. The human being for these theorists is a fundamentally plural being (Durkheim, 1984; Mead, 1972; Freud, 1984).

This process creates with it the possibility of the self as capable of being deceived and capable of deceiving—that is, capable of alienation and of self-alienation, of trust and therefore of being misled. In this light, egoistic and anomic currents imply an alienating self; and fatalistic and altruistic currents imply an alienating society. To be sure, the individual organism is always the focus of alienation, what changes, however, is the source of this alienation, and what the individual is being alienated from. Furthermore, egoism and anomie are inherently tied to the question of self-deception. Whereas, altruism and fatalism are tethered to the idea of trust and the process of being misled.

Specifically, fatalism involves processes in which society ultimately alienates the individual/organism from society; and the classic example given here is slavery in which the individual becomes torn apart from the very conditions of existence that society creates. Altruism presupposes conditions that lead society into alienating the individual/organism from the self. Perhaps a contemporary example of such alienation is embodied in suicide bombers, where it may be said that an eclipse of the self is occurring with consensus of the group (society), and therefore, the individual abandons self-preservation. Contrarily, egoism implies a means from which the ‘the self’ alienates the individual/organism from society. An exaggerated example can be found in the leaders of commerce, whose self-centered actions come at the cost of the lives of

millions, in short at the cost of society. Furthermore, anomie encompasses modes of being which direct ‘the self’ towards alienating the individual/organism from the self. An example of this occurrence is found in consumer culture which allows and encourages the passions of ‘the self’ to reign free at the cost of our own well-being.

It becomes apparent that for Durkheim self and society are tethered to the other. In this sense alienation is also attached to the other and is a process that occurs from our interactions and co-being with others. Baudrillard appears to tap on this notion when he describes “the hell of the other” as rife with alienation. Others, then, become required in order for the self to be alienated, whether it is society as other or the self as other. If the ending of the difference, and therefore of the finitude, between the self and other heralds the ending of alienation; then what comes about to give weight to existence in “the hell of the same?” Baudrillard does not directly answer this question; indeed he seems content to simply indicate that that “we have entered this new hell.” However, I wish to propose that if alienation represents a strain with the other, then boredom represents a strain with the same. If the “hell of the other,” characterized by alienation, is being eclipsed by the “hell of the same,” it follows that *boredom* becomes an emerging existential phenomenon.

Regenerative Medicine and the Transcending Self

How can advances in regenerative and reconstructive medicine be understood within the framework of human existence and of global culture more generally? Stem cell research involves the search for the first cell, a sort of return to an undifferentiated

mass of cells from which the specialization of cells erupts. Bone, blood, cartilage, neurons and other organs stem from these cells. Theoretically, this research and technology can be used in the process of perpetually regenerating human bodies, a fountain of youth, if you will. But here I wish to emphasize the importance of the homogenous mass of cells known as stem cells. This return to stem cells, to a primitive undifferentiated mass, is a symptom of the cultural segregation of finitude, the consequence of which is to break the chains of the human body and of the given conditions of human existence. I do not wish here to undermine the benefits that this research and technology provide for individuals with impairments that I cannot even begin to fathom. Instead, my point is that these technologies will one day implode, that is they will break the bounds of their own initial purposive direction and this will result in their superfluous proliferation, much like reconstructive surgery has today. What the pervasiveness of these technologies allows for is the rendering of the conditions of human existence inert, not by denying life, but on the contrary by denying death. Individuals become superficial and indifferent to the extent that they no longer are impeded by or allowed to experience the finitude of their choices or of the conditions of human existences they are thrust into.

At the center of these medicines, old age is being pushed to the limits of human existence. There seems to be a frenzied attempt to capture and preserve youth indefinitely, at its upmost peak. Indeed, today the very process of aging has been “pathologized” and reconstructive medicine (plastic surgery) is at the forefront of “solving” this newly defined problem. It is no longer deemed natural or even desirable to

experience a wane in youth. Finitude to one's passions is no longer allowed and any decrease in one's libido is now cured with regiments of pills. However, this does not imply that society is not aging or that it is transcending mortality. Although society, through the regenerative and reconstructive medicines, is "decentering" discourses with and about old age experiences and mortality, these processes continue to accumulate in mass on its outskirts.

One way in which mortality is increasing at outstanding rates on the periphery is evidenced in the predictions of demographers that if current mortality trends continue, the U.S. will experience an increase in mortality rates. This translates into the fact that for the first time in the modern history of the West, life expectancies of new generations of people will decrease. Indeed the very consumptive nature of perpetual youth in motion threatens our very well being. Today America is ranked as the fattest country in the world, a condition that is highly associated with morbidity. Future generations of people are threatened by a decreased capacity to experience life to the extent that they will live fewer years on earth than the previous generation.

Similarly, at this very moment the government is in the process of extending the age of retirement to 67, thereby expanding the number of years in which an individual must be a producing member of society. It is thus involved in expanding the existence of youth and eclipsing the experience of old age. Just as the healthcare system is finding it difficult to deal with the monetary cost of segregating finitude in nursing homes, the social security system is finding it difficult to deal with the monetary cost of supporting

an increasingly elderly population. As youth becomes normative, old age threatens it from every corner. At the very heart of this situation, the medicines and other technical remedies that purport to resolve finitude threaten to create an avalanche over our social constructs and their meanings.

Given these emergent conditions of existence, as offered by regenerative and reconstructive medicine, our bodies are ceasing to be involved in any discourse with or experience of finitude. That is, our bodies now become constantly subjected to the insatiable desires of the self, to any fad in “herd-mentality,” and perhaps more daunting to all manner of second-handed (indeed x-handed) experiences of and ways of being in the world. Furthermore, the perpetual reproduction of youth is eliminating age difference from our cultural discourses and practices and as such old age is threatening us from the margins of culture—that is, in a sense finitude threatens us from the deserts of the real.

Social Implosion of Time and the Internet

Mead’s claim of the “present as the locus of reality;” that is, that both the past and future emerge in the present conditions of existence and experience and thus are subject to social re-construction, imply a finitude of both past and future events. Mead indicates that, although they cannot be relived, past events have occurred and left their mark in the present in our objects and in our memories from which they can be re-constructed, re-interpreted and quasi re-experienced (x-handedly). These re-constructions, re-interpretations and quasi re-experiences are not however a continued reoccurrence of past existences. The event is not experienced anew, but rather, the event

is experienced as having already occurred. What changes in the re-constructions is how we perceive and interpret these occurred events; in this way, the past informs the present in ever-diverse manners. Likewise, the future becomes conceptualized in the present and thus becomes a goal setting enterprise. Anticipations represent a way in which the future manifests itself in the present and is able to direct present actions. The anticipation of a future event in a way preordains its eventual occurrence. It is in these ways that past and future provide the present with a sense of finitude, with a sense passed, passing and passable.

Strikingly, the Internet increasingly appears to delete finitude by creating a place in which the past becomes an ever more concretized present and the future an ever meaningless enterprise. By concretized present I mean that in contemporary culture the Internet is increasingly recording the present. We are discovering that what we say and do is finding its way onto the Internet in concrete ways, for example in texts, photos and videos. And that as the Internet grows to mediate ever-larger swaths of human experience; the past begins to take on a concrete lived existence in the present. The past is forever stored in the hidden databases of the Internet and forever frozen on countless screens. This creates a blurring sense of time surrounding an event's occurrence, instead only the ceaseless proliferation of an event, now known as going "viral," occurs, in which the past is experienced as a presently occurring existence. Furthermore, the future becomes a meaningless enterprise to the extent that it cannot escape the mass density of a concretized past, it simply appears as a mirror of past events. The informing quality of a presently experienced concretized past is reaching a critical point and is leading to the

disenchantment of the possibilities of an emerging and directing future. Instead, we are left with an increasingly informed present and a future that appears as the inevitable replay of past events. In this way authentic existential action in the face of an unwritten future is haunted by the specter of predictability. Because the Internet lacks a sense of time that includes finitude, captured events are prone to unceasing re-occurrence and thus are ceasing to be experienced as unfolding across time. The past reoccurs in the present, the present reproduces the past and the future will replay the past and thus becomes meaningless in affecting change.

Strangely enough time still very much unfolds in the pragmatic manner Mead described. As such, like the other phenomena discussed in this paper, the finitude removed from time is accumulating on the borders of a culture unsuited to tackle the issue. One way in which it is accumulating has to do with social networking and the increasing social experience the Internet is capturing and unceasingly reproducing. Increasingly, employers, prosecutors and a myriad of other bureaucratic officials are using social networking sites and other Internet sites for evaluative purposes.

As such the entirety of an individual's online experience is now informing present job opportunities, criminal and civil trials and other important social processes with devastating effects. That is, the Internet does not provide death or culmination (finitude) to an event and as such the event can always be found and re-played. Any event, or events, in an individual's life can come back (resurrect) at any time to haunt the person and they often do. Individuals are now vulnerable to the sporadic eruption of their

own pasts, subject to an emergent form of double jeopardy. In a way society is becoming “felonized,” as individuals become doomed to be forever followed by a list of their misdeeds invisibly informing and thus impeding their own futures.

Transgressing Finitude and Global Warming

Global warming represents another such threat, indeed perhaps the greatest contemporary threat, on the fringes of civilization that has occurred because as a culture we lack the ability to make sense of waste, to meaningfully incorporate finitude into consumption and thus to allow people to reconcile it existentially. Global warming is a symbolic culmination of the way in which death and finitude have been pushed to the brink of culture and thus of human experience. Furthermore, it represents a way in which finitude is catching up with a culture that excludes it from existence.

At its heart the antagonism between consumer culture and global warming is one over the term ‘no’ and ‘yes’. Consumer culture does not necessarily respond to every question with yes, but rather it cannot respond to any question that deals with its own finitude with no. The most important question that global warming poses to culture is, should consumption continue in the face of such a globally annihilating force? Consumer culture is incapable of responding with no to the extent that it is currently characterized by the marginalization of finitude. “Should I continue driving cars? Yes, more efficient cars.” “What should I do to curb my impact on the environment?” The answer is not ‘stop consuming,’ but consume more and different things. Everyday more and more “green” items are offered for our consumptive pleasure.

The issue here is the absence of discussion on or experience of the finitude that global warming may bring: an absence that translates into collective habits and practices. In the face of global warming, consumer culture has replied with a plethora of new commodities to flood all possibility of a genuine response of finitude to the never-ending chain of consumption. We recycle in the face of utter catastrophe, not to put an end to consumption, but rather to insure that we will be able to consume tomorrow. In other words we have not decided to change course, but have decided to continue “full steam ahead.” What should be done in the face of economic meltdown? The answer is more consumer spending or perhaps “wiser” consumer spending, rather than to limit or stop spending. What should be done to solve world hunger? Answer: eat McDonalds, which donates a portion of its profits to hunger programs. And most importantly, should the very tools of global warming, technology and consumption, be used to stop the phenomena they have helped spur on, the answer to this question is a resounding yes. The very causes of human suffering now become a tool for their elimination. The message becomes indulge, not sacrifice, to save tomorrow.

Fin

This brings me to the dilemma of my current existential moment, how best to bring to a conclusion a chapter about finitude. Perhaps the best way to end is to begin anew. It is strange to think that contemporary culture’s inability to perceive of and respond to death coincides with decreasing fertility rates in the developed world. As the self becomes an infinite project increasingly devoid of any experience with finitude, it

seems incapable of authentically beginning anew, much as Durkheim posits, it appears to be the case that a disruption in death results in a disruption of life. Humanity appears to be increasingly unable to bring about new life in the form of birthing new generations. As much as contemporary society is capable of reproducing itself *ad infinitum*, it appears incapable of genuinely producing a new autonomous generation of life able to create its own disparate destiny *ad libitum*.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS: FINAL THOUGHTS

Although the coherence of this work has been commented upon in the introduction, it will be helpful to quickly reiterate the main points in order to leave a stronger sense of cohesion to the work. The principal argument behind these chapters is that the works of both Durkheim and Mead coincide upon the metaphysics of sociology, specifically on the core concept of the social. A second argument contained within these pages is that the works of both Durkheim and Mead are relevant to a discussion of postmodern social theory, specifically to that of Baudrillard and Rorty. And lastly, that the works of Rorty but more specifically of Baudrillard have challenged the metaphysical foundations of sociology as a discipline.

Reflections on Sociology

Sociology as a discipline, especially mainstream American sociology that continues to repress postmodernism and as such continues to be relatively unconscious of its metaphysical crisis, is in need of re-analyzing and re-conceptualizing its foundations (Ritzer, 1997; Mestrovic, 1991). The sociological point, scientific in its affirmation, grounding these empirically delineated objects of study, has come to be challenged by the work of the postmodernist, especially that of Baudrillard, who theoretically travails towards an obituary of the sociological subject—that is the death of

the social (1983). This argument more fully discussed in the previous chapter as questions of finitude, death, culture and the social were brought to the fore and woven into the chapter as a critique of current viewpoints on these subjects.

If we as sociologists take this theoretical challenge seriously, as we should, then sociology as a scientific or humanist endeavor is approaching an event horizon. This is especially the case as the social implodes into that statistical anomaly, the mass. According to Baudrillard the mass becomes prominent as the defining characteristics of the social collapse into one another—that is, as they no longer demarcate anything. Sociology must deal with this antithesis through synthesis, as suggested by the dialectical process, that is, through a paradigm shift that will allow sociologists to re-access a shifting reality.

The postmodern crisis in sociology spirals around a void of scientific specificity. Sociology when confronted by the demands of the uncritically objectivist, as represented by empirical science, internalizes this other and as such is unable to see the eclipse of its own subject of study, the social, by its pure models and abstractions. Ironically the “hard sciences,” as the physical sciences have come to be known, though claiming pure objectivity, fail to be critical (the way pragmatism was) of their own “hardness.” Similarly, as Seidman (in Ritzer, 1997) argues, Sociology and more specifically sociological theory have become insular to the extent that it is increasingly dominated by discourses that are “self-referential” and “have little or nothing to do with the social world” (12-3). Accompanying this *irreference*, in the Baudrillardian sense, and

irrelevance of sociological theory is the sociological struggle to ground itself in some form of quantification, indeed today the growing use of “mixed methods” (the incorporation of both quantitative and qualitative methods) heralds not the importance of qualitative research, but its inability to stand alone, its death (1983 Section I). It is always the budding qualitative sociologist who is encouraged (if only for sake of marketability) to use “mixed methods” in her research. A quantitative researcher, on the other hand, is highly unlikely to be encouraged to undertake a similar venture and incorporate qualitative methods in his approach. The mirroring by sociology of a science that purports objectivity through the studying of un-subjective static phenomena (already dead subjects), that is non-human phenomena, can only lead to the loss of humanity within sociology as a human science.

The Death of the Social?

The social is the concept that lies at the bedrock of sociology, however, as the waning of sociological theory in the States demonstrates, sociology continues to be unreflective of its subject (Ritzer, 1997). The topographical position of the social within the bedrock perforce obscures it from easy focus. The obscurity of the social within a no longer nascent discipline is the result of a repression whose violent maneuver banishes the social to the bedrock. In this state of repression, the sociological subject is dead; however, avoiding symbolic death the subject reappears to undermine the efforts of sociologists. (Indeed any sociologist today can attest to that panic, that abjection which

arises deep within some unnamable place when that most inevitable and destructive of questions is uttered in an Introduction to Sociology course: “what is social structure?”)

Hence, effort must be taken to actively behold this idea or representation of the social, lest it submerge into the collective unconscious of sociology. This is of critical importance for two explicit reasons. First because the social, being not a thing-in-itself (reified), but nonetheless an intersecting phenomenon *sui generis* may be radically changing. And second, because no longer a question of scientific concern, the social becomes assumed rather than empirically authenticated, the equivalent of a loss of our objective foundation. In other words, the social becomes completely metaphysical in that sociologists content with the models sociological instruments provide, are no longer concerned with the referent. Its existence is either oblivious or merely an assumed afterthought necessary for the continued explanation of various other phenomena: race, class, ethnicity, religion, structure, agency, etc.

In sum what is at stake, then, is the very subject of sociological inquiry, that which distinguishes sociology from other scientific and humanist pursuits, its very essence (Levi-Strauss 1963, Fink 2004). As such the chapters of the thesis presented here comes together in that each purports a revisiting of the social in the classical work of Mead and Durkheim and the challenges raised by postmodernist theory with respect not just to the reality of the social, but also to sociology as a discipline. In particular this thesis also raises questions into the scientific claims made by modern sociology which seem to demonstrate incongruence between the scientific methods employed and the still

unanchored problem of sociology. As Catlin notes, in his introduction to *The Rules of The Sociological Method*, Durkheim identified this issue over a century ago—that is that sociology trapped between the sciences and the humanities, has always been a scientific humanism and a humanist science and must labor to create its scientific criteria and methodology and not simply mimic those of the physical science that are less complex (1964). This deep understanding from one of the masters and founders of sociology seems as applicable to sociology today as it was at the time of Durkheim’s proclamation. It has been my objective to revisit some of these critical points that remain unresolved in contemporary sociology, as observed by the postmodernists I have discussed. And to suggest the timely need for a new generation of theorists and researchers to jointly pursue a response to the trappings implied by Durkheim. This thesis has been a modest attempt to return to the persistent “trapping” of sociology and to remind sociologists on the need for theorists and researchers to jointly pursue Durkheim’s challenge of establishing its own scientific criteria and methodology and not simply to mimic the physical sciences.

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